

DAILY LOCAL NEWS

[The Daily Local](#) (dailylocal.com), Serving Chester County, PA - Business

Winter's winners and losers

Stories of success and sinking business from historic snowfalls



Sunday, March 21, 2010

By GRETCHEN METZ, Staff Writer

Spring is here.

It's official, Saturday marked the first day.

Daffodils are pushing up from the thawing ground, the robins are arriving and the snow mounds have melted in the company parking lot.

Staff photo by Larry McDevitt A Cat front-end loader plows the West Goshen Shopping Center parking lot during the December 19 snowstorm.

It's business as usual, depending what business you're in, putting behind a harsh winter that helped some businesses and hurt others.

For the lucky ones like hardware stores and ski shops, every flake of the Dec. 19, Feb. 6 and 10 blizzards was a blessing.

For the not-so-lucky, the three winter blizzards left a stack of unanticipated bills, lost hours, and revenues that sank into the deep freeze. Left wringing their hands are operators of trucking companies, real estate companies and airports, just to name a few.

And then there were the few like supermarkets and snow plow operators that finished winter with a calculator and a headache, left to split the difference between spikes in business and a corresponding jump in costs.



Photo courtesy of A. Duie Pyle. Tractor trailers get snow scraped off their tops.

While food shopper demand peaks before a forecasted blizzard, that's where the good times end.

"Sales go up but so do expenses," said Jo Natale, spokeswoman at Wegmans markets. "It's hard to say if we're a winner or a loser."

Rushing inventory to the stores before the oncoming snowstorm means increased distribution costs, Natale said. Once the snow starts falling, it takes longer to get tractor trailers to the stores. Labor costs are more and then there is the extra expense of keeping the parking lots plowed so customers can shop.

Once the snow really hits, customers stay home, said Natale in a phone interview from Wegmans' headquarters in Rochester, N.Y.

Another business that looks like a winner from the outside is the snowplow operator.

From the inside, it's another story, according to Steve Macanga, owner of S.A. Macanga, a paving company that uses its trucks for plowing when the snow starts falling.

"It's incremental revenue. We're still trying to figure it out," Macanga said of revenues versus expenses. "We spent a lot of money on fuel, a lot of things broke — things snap

from the cold — and the salt damaged the wiring."

Now that spring is here and the asphalt plants are restarting operations, Macanga will be paving again, but winter has even had a chilling effect on that.

Macaga, who does municipal work, said he has been told by some townships and boroughs that the money spent on snow removal will mean cutbacks in their paving budgets.

n

Snow is also a four-letter word for truckers.

Steve O'Kane, president of trucking company A. Duie Pyle of West Goshen, remembers the winter as "yuck."

"We were losers all the way around," O'Kane said. "There was no good that came out of this."

Pyle had to clear 15 to 20 acres of blacktop at several of its terminal locations. After the second February blizzard, one that came four days after the first, there was no place to push the new snow.

At that point, Pyle had to resort to front-end loaders and dump trucks to haul tons of snow away, O'Kane said, joking that he considered sending the dump trucks to Vancouver, Canada, the site of the Winter Olympics that didn't have enough snow.

In addition to the parking lots, the terminals' flat roofs were under stress from the snow, creating another snow removal job, O'Kane said.

Before business could resume, snow needed to be cleared from the tops of tractor trailers before they hit the road.

To do that, the vehicles were driven under a scrapping bar. What is usually a simple job got more complicated this winter because of the amount of snow.

O'Kane said after each tractor trailer was cleared of snow, a snow plow had to clear what had been scrapped off otherwise the next tractor trailer in line couldn't fit under the bar.

"The winter wasn't kind to us," O'Kane said.

The only good to come out of the winter was that there were no serious work-related accidents, O'Kane said.

But surviving the blizzards didn't come cheap.

"There was tremendous expense, frustration and extraordinary sacrifice for some of our employees," O'Kane said. "I'm glad for spring."

For Gary Hudson, who manages Chester County/G.O. Carlson Airport in Valley for the Chester County Area Airport Authority, snow is a "very bad" four-letter word.

During a normal snowstorm, the airport plows the runway and it's back in business.

With two huge storms back-to-back, the snow banks were too high to be left on the side of the runway, the taxiway or the ramps, Hudson said, explaining there was a danger that the tips of the aircraft wings could hit the high snow banks and get damaged.

Snow from the runway and taxiway had to be moved a considerable distance away, a time-consuming, expensive process. When it was time to clear the ramps, Hudson said he had to scout out a new snow dump location, settling on an open field near the terminal's parking lot.

"There are only so many places you can put snow," Hudson said. "It was tiring on the men because so much snow came down. They plowed during the event because if they waited until it stopped, they wouldn't have been able to move it."

Because a state of emergency was declared, Hudson has filed a reimbursement request with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and hopes to recoup \$8,000.

"This is the worst winter I've ever experienced," said Hudson who spent three nights at the airport, testing the runway's friction value every hour to determine when the airport could reopen.

But it did pay off, Chester County Airport along with Allentown Airport were open when Philadelphia, Harrisburg and New Castle, Del. airports were still closed, Hudson said.

Realtor Kit Anstey summed up February as "very difficult."

Home sales were good and getting better from November to December and into January, then came the blizzards of February, said Anstey, a realtor at the Kit Anstey Real Estate Team at Prudential Fox & Roach in West Goshen.

Homebuyers being transferred to Chester County from out of the area either found out their flight was grounded or were afraid their flight would be grounded so they canceled their appointments to look at homes. Home inspections were difficult. For-sale signs were buried under mounds of snow.

Anstey said his team went around and dug out the signs and put them on top of the snow.

This was worst winter for storms since the 1960s, Anstey said.

"Even the ice storm of 1996 didn't compare," Anstey said. "It was every weekend, and this is West Chester, not Buffalo."

n

In the winners' column, put local ski shops and hardware stores who called the winter's record snowfall the "perfect storm," at least when it came to their retail businesses.

The first blizzard on Dec. 19 put shoppers in the snow sports-buying mood just in time for the holidays.

Then the two back-to-back blizzards that shut down schools and businesses were followed by the President's Day weekend, generating even more free time for those who love the outdoors.

At Wick's Ski & Sports in West Whiteland, the nation's oldest family-owned and operated ski shop, you could say customers came in droves in mid February.

But, "that would be polite," said Wick's hard good manager Phil Pugliese in a February interview. "They're coming in gaggles, flocks, in mass amounts, by the busload."

Matt Clair, owner of Ace Hardware on Strasburg Road in East Bradford, considered the blizzards golden.

"It obviously helped our business. I don't know how many pallets I went through," Clair said about inventory.

Because the snow was so heavy, homeowners' shovels broke and had to be replaced, Clair said. And when the weather forecasts called for two feet of snow, homeowners came back to buy more shovels so their spouse and children could help.

In the hardware game, snow sells the S's: salt, shovels, sleds and the big ticket snowblowers. Clair said he sold out of 10 to 15 snowblowers.

If he had the winter to do over again, Clair said he would have stocked more snowblowers but they are an expensive item and take up a lot of floor space.

Retailers can't stock them and "hope it's going to snow," Clair said. "You just can't sit on all that stuff."

To contact staff writer Gretchen Metz, send an e-mail to gmetz@dailylocal.com.

URL: <http://www.dailylocal.com/articles/2010/03/21/business/srv0000007782933.prt>

© 2010 dailylocal.com, a [Journal Register](#) Property